

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

GO BACK? NEVER!

A Sermon

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“And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly . . . city.”—Hebrews xi. 15, 16.

ABRAHAM left his country at God's command, and he never went back again. The proof of faith lies in perseverance. There is a sort of faith which doth run well for a while, but it is soon ended, and it doth not obey the truth. The Apostle tells us, however, that the people of God were not forced to continue, because they could not return. Had they been mindful of the place from whence they came out, they might have found opportunities to return. Frequent opportunities came in their way. There was communication kept up between them and the old family house at Padan-Aram. They had news concerning the family house. More than that, there were messages exchanged; servants were sometimes sent. There was also a natural relationship kept up. Did not Rebekah come from thence? And Jacob, one of the patriarchs, was driven to go down into the land; but he could not stay there; he was always unrestful, until at last he stole a march upon Laban and came back to the proper life, the life that he had chosen—the life that God had commanded him to live—of a pilgrim and stranger in the land of promise. You see, then, they had many opportunities to have returned, to have settled down comfortably and tilled the ground which their fathers did before them; but they continued to follow the uncomfortable life of wanderers of the weary foot, who dwell

in tents, who own no plot of land. They were aliens in the country which God had given them by promise.

Now our position is a very similar one. As many of us as have believed in Christ Jesus have been called out. The very meaning of a church is called out—by Christ; we have been separated. I trust we know what it is to have gone without the camp bearing Christ's reproach. Henceforth in this world we have no home, no true abiding home for our spirits. Our home is beyond the flood. We are looking for it among the unseen things. We are strangers and sojourners, as all our fathers were; dwellers in this wilderness, passing through it to reach the Canaan which is to be the land of our perpetual inheritance. I shall this evening first speak to you upon:—

I. THE OPPORTUNITIES WHICH WE HAVE HAD, AND STILL HAVE, TO RETURN to the old house if we were mindful of it. Indeed, in the text it seems to me as if the word "opportunities were not in our case nearly strong enough. It is a wonder of wonders that we have not gone back to the world, and to our own sin. When I think of the strength of divine grace, I do not marvel that saints should persevere, but when I remember the weakness of their nature, it seems a miracle of miracles that there should be one Christian in the world a single hour. It is nothing short of Godhead's utmost stretch of might that preserves a Christian from going back to his old unregenerate condition. We have had opportunities to have returned. My brethren, we have such *opportunities in our daily calling*. Some of you are engaged in the midst of ungodly men. You have opportunities to sin as they do, to fall into their excess, into their forgetfulness of God, or even into their blasphemies. Oh! have you not often strong inducements, if it were not for the grace of God, to become as they are. Or if your occupation keeps you alone, yet, my brethren, there is one who is pretty sure to keep us company and to seek our mischief—the destroyer, the tempter. And how frequently will even solitude have temptations as severe as publicity could possibly bring! There are snares in company, but there are snares in our loneliness. We have many opportunities to return. In the parlour—in conversation, perhaps, in the kitchen about the day's work—or in the field, or on the mart, on land, and on sea. Where can we go to escape from these opportunities to return? If we should mount upon the wings of the wind, could we find "a lodge in some vast wilderness" where we could be quite clear from all the opportunities to go back to the old sins in which we once indulged? No; each man's calling may seem to him to be more full of temptation than his fellows, but it is not so. Our temptations are pretty equally distributed, I dare say, after all. And all of us might say that we find in our avocations from hour to hour many opportunities to return.

But, dear brethren, it is not merely in our business and in our calling—the mischief lies in our bones and in our flesh. *Opportunities to return in our own nature*. Ah! who that knows himself does not find strong incentives to return? Ah! how often will our imagina-

tion paint sin in very glowing colours, and though we loathe the sin and loathe ourselves for thinking of it, yet how many a man might say, "Had it not been for divine grace, my feet had almost gone, my steps had well-nigh slipped." How strong is the evil in the best man, how stern is the conflict to keep under the body, lest corruption should prevail! You may be diligent in secret prayer, and perhaps the devil may have been asleep till you began to pray, and when you are most fervent then will he also become most rampant. When you get nearest to God, Satan will sometimes seem to get nearer to you. Opportunities to return as long as you are in this body will be with you to the very edge of Jordan. You will meet with temptations when you sit gasping on the banks of the last river, waiting for the summons to cross; it may be that your fiercest temptation may come even then. Oh! this flesh, this body of this death—wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from it? But while it continues with me I shall find opportunities to return.

And, dear brethren and sisters, these opportunities to return are prepared for us *in any condition of life and any change* through which we may pass. For instance, how often have professors, when they have prospered, found opportunities to return? I sigh to think of how many that appeared very earnest Christians when they were struggling for bread have become very dull and cold now that they have become rich. How often does it happen that the poor earnest Christian has associated with the people of God at all meetings, and felt proud to be there, but when he has risen in the world and stood an inch or two above others in common esteem, he could not go with God's people any longer. He must seek out the world's fashionable church and join in it to get a share of the respectability and prestige that will always gather there, and he has turned aside from the faith—if not altogether, in his heart at least, in the defence of it in his life. Beware of the high places: they are very slippery. There is not all the enjoyment that you may think to be gathered in retirement and in ease, but, on the contrary, luxury often puffeth up, and abundance makes the heart to swell with vanity. If any of you are prospered in this world, oh! watch, lest ye be mindful to return to the place whence you came out.

But it is just the same with adversity. Alas! I have had to mourn over Christian men—at least I thought they were—who have grown very poor, and when they have grown poor they hardly felt they could associate with those whom they knew in better circumstances. I think they were mistaken in the notion that they would be despised. I should be ashamed of the Christian who would despise his fellow because God was dealing with him somewhat severely in providence, yet there is that feeling in the human heart, and though there may be no unkind treatment, yet often times the spirit is apt to imagine it, and I have known some absent themselves by degrees from the assembly of God. It is smoothing the way to return to your old places. And, indeed, I have not wondered when

I have seen some professors grow cold when I have thought how they were compelled to live. Perhaps they lived in a comfortable home before, and now they have to take a room where there is no comfort, and where sounds of blasphemy meet them. Or in some cases, perhaps, they have to go to the workhouse, and be far away from all Christian intercourse or anything that could comfort them. It is only grace that can keep grace alive under such circumstances. You see, then, whether you grow rich, or whether you become poor, you will have these opportunities to return. If you want to go back to sin, to carnality, to a love of the world, to your old condition, you never need to be prevented from doing so by want of opportunities. It will be something else that will prevent you, for these opportunities are plentiful indeed.

Opportunities to return—let me say just this much more about them—are *often furnished by the example of others.*

“When any turn from Zion’s way,
Alas! what numbers do!
Methinks I hear my Saviour say,
Wilt thou forsake me too?”

Departures from the faith of those whom we highly esteem are, at least while we are young, very severe trials to us. We cannot think that religion can be true if such a man is a hypocrite. It staggers us: we cannot make it out. Opportunities to return you have now, but ah! may grace be given you so that if others play the Judas, instead of leading you to do the same, it may only bind you more fast to your Lord, and make you walk more carefully, lest you also prove a son of perdition.

And oh! my brethren and sisters, if some of us wished to return, we should have this opportunity to return in a certain sense. We should find that *none of our old friends would refuse to receive us.* There is many a Christian who, if he were to go back to the gaiety of the world, would find the world receive him with open arms. He was the favourite of the ballroom once; he was the wit that set the table on a roar; he was the man who, above all, was courted when he moved in the circle of the vain and frivolous; glad enough would they be to see him come back. What shouts of triumph would they raise, and how would they welcome him! Oh! may the day never come to you, you young people especially, who have lately put on the Lord Jesus Christ and professed his name, when you shall be welcomed by the world; but may you for ever forget also your own kindred and your father’s house, so shall the king greatly desire your beauty, for he is your Lord, and worship you him. Separation from the world shall endear you to the Saviour, and bring you conscious enjoyment of his presence; but opportunities to return I have shown you now are plentiful enough.

Perhaps you will say, “Why does the Lord make them so plentiful? Could he not have kept us from temptation?” There is no

doubt he could, but it never was the Master's intention that we should all be hothouse plants. He taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," but at the same time he does lead us there, and intends to do it; and this is for the proving of our faith to see whether it be true faith or not. Only he bids us also pray, "Deliver us from evil." Depend upon it, faith that is never tried is not faith. It must be sooner or later exercised. God does not create useless things. He intends that the faith which he gives should have its test, and should glorify his name. These opportunities to return are meant to try your faith, and they are sent to you to prove that you are a volunteer soldier. Why, if grace was a sort of chain that manacled you so that you could not leave your Lord, if it had become a physical impossibility for you to forsake your Saviour, there would be no credit in your abiding faithful to him. He that does not run away because his legs are weak, does not prove himself a hero, but he that could run, but won't run, that could desert his Lord, but won't desert him, has within him a principle of grace stronger than any fetter could be—the highest, strongest, noblest bond that unites a man to the Saviour. By this you shall know whether you are Christ's or not when you have opportunity to return—if you don't return, that shall prove you are his. Two men are going along a road, and they have got a dog behind them. I do not know to whom that dog belongs, but I'll tell you directly. They are coming to a cross road. One goes to the right, the other goes to the left. Now which man does the dog follow? That is his master. Now when Christ and the world go together, you cannot tell which a man is following; but when there is a separation, and Christ goes one way, and your interest, your pleasure seems to go the other way, if you can part with the world, and keep with Christ, then you are one of his. So that these opportunities to return may serve us a good purpose by trying our faith, and helping us to see whether we are, indeed, the Lord's or no. But we must pass on (for we have a very wealthy text to-night) to notice the second point.

II. WE CANNOT TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GO BACK BECAUSE WE DESIRE SOMETHING BETTER than we could get by going back. An insatiable desire has been implanted in us by divine grace, which urges us to:—

"Forget the steps already trod,
And onward press our way."

Notice how the text puts it, "But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly." Brethren, *we desire something better than this world.* Do you not? Has the world ever satisfied you? Perhaps it did when you were dead in sin. A dead world may satisfy a dead heart, but ever since you have known something of better things have you ever been contented with the world? Perhaps you have tried to fill your soul with worldly things. God has prospered you, and you have said, "Oh! this is well!" Your children have been about you; you have had many household joys, and you have

said, "I could stay here for ever." Did not you find very soon that there was a thorn in the flesh? Did you ever get a rose in this world that was altogether without a thorn? Have you not been obliged to say, after you have had all that the world could give you, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" ? I am sure it has been so with you. All God's saints will confess that if the Lord were to say to them, "You shall have all the world, and that shall be your portion," they would be broken-hearted men. "Nay, my Lord," they would say, "don't put me off so, don't give me these husks, though thou give mountains of them. Thou art more glorious than all the mountains of praise. Give me thyself, and take these all away if so it please thee, but don't, my Lord, don't think I can fill myself with these things." We desire something better.

Notice, next, that there is this about a Christian, that *even when he does not enjoy something better, he desires it*. How much of character is revealed in our desires. I felt greatly encouraged when I read this, "Now they desire a better"—the word "country" has been inserted by our translators—they desire something better. I know I do. I do not always enjoy something better. Dark is my path. I cannot see my Lord, I cannot enjoy his presence, and though it may be a little thing to desire, let me say a good desire is more than nature ever grew. Grace has given it. It is a great thing to be desirous. They desire a better country. And because we desire this better thing, we cannot go back and be content with things which gratified us once.

More than that, if ever the child of God gets entangled, for a while he is uneasy in it. Abraham's slips—for he made one or two—were made when he had left the land and gone down among the Philistines. But he was not easy there; he must come back again. And Jacob, he had found a wife, nay, two, in Laban's land, but he was not content. No; no child of God can be. Whatever we may find in this world, we shall never find a heaven here. We may hunt the world through, and say, "This looks like a little paradise," but there is no paradise this side of the skies—for a child of God at any rate. There is enough out there in the farmyard for the hogs, but there is not for the children. There is enough in the world for sinners, but there is not for saints. They have stronger, sharper, and more vehement desires, for they have a nobler life within them, and they desire a better country; and even if they get entangled for a while in this country, and in a certain measure become citizens of it, they are still uneasy; their citizenship is in heaven, and they cannot rest anywhere but there. After all, we confess to-night, and rejoice in the confession, that our best hopes are for things that are out of sight. Our expectations are our largest possessions. The things that we have, that we value, are ours to-day by faith. We don't enjoy them yet, but when our heirship shall be fully manifested, and we shall come to the full ripe age, oh! then we shall come into our wealth, to the mansions and to the glory and to the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord. So, then, you see the reason why the Chris-

tian cannot go back, though he has many opportunities, lies in this, that through divine grace he has had produced in his heart desires for something better, and even when he does not as yet enjoy that something better, the desires themselves become mighty bonds that keep him from returning to what he was. Dear brethren, cultivate these desires more and more. If they have such a separating effect upon our character in keeping us from the world, let us cultivate them much. Do you think that we meditate enough upon heaven? Look at the miser. When does he forget his gold? He dreams of it. He has locked it up to-night, and he goes to bed, but he is afraid he heard a footstep downstairs, and he goes to see. He looks to that iron safe to be quite sure that it is well secured—he cannot forget his dear gold. Let us think of heaven, of Christ, of all the blessings of the covenant, and let us thus keep our desires wide awake. The more they draw us to heaven the more we shall be separated from earth. But I must close with the sweetest part of the text.

III. WE HAVE FOR THIS REASON GREAT BLESSEDNESS.

“Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he hath prepared for them a city.” Because they are strangers, and because they will not go back to their old abode, therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. He might be. What poor people God’s people are—poor many of them in circumstances, but how many of them I might very well call poor as to spiritual things! I do not think if any of us had such a family as God has we should ever have patience with them. We cannot even have, when we judge ourselves rightly, patience with ourselves; but how is it that God bears with the ill-manners of such a froward, weak, foolish, forgetful people as his people are? He might well be ashamed to be called their God if you look upon them as they are. Own them—how can he own them? Does he not himself sometimes say of them, “How can I put thee among the children?” and yet he does. Viewed as they are, they are such a rabble in many respects that it is marvellous he is not ashamed of them; and yet he never is; and to prove that he is not ashamed of them we have this fact, that he calls himself their God, “I will be your God,” and he oftentimes seems to speak of it as a very joyful thing to his own heart. “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” and while he calls himself their God he never forbids *them* to call him their God; and in the presence of the great ones of the earth they may call him their God—anywhere. He is not ashamed that it should be so. We have sometimes heard of a brother who has become great and rich in the world, and he has had some poor brother or some distant relative, and when he has seen him in the street he has been obliged just to speak to him and own him; but I dare say he wished him a long way off, especially if some rich acquaintance happened to be with him who should say, “Why, Smith, who was that wretched seedy-looking fellow that you spoke to?” He does not like to say, “That is my relation,” or “That is my brother.” But we find that

Jesus Christ, however low his people may sink, and however poor they may be, is not ashamed to call them brethren, nor to let them look up to him in all the depths of their degradation and call him "brother born for adversity." He is not ashamed to call them brethren. And one reason seems to me to be because *he does not judge them by what they are, but by what he has prepared for them.* Notice the text, "Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he hath prepared for them—he hath prepared for *them* a city." They are poor now, but God, to whom things to come are things present, sees them in their fair white linen which is the righteousness of the saints. All you can see in the poor child of God is a hard-working, labouring man, who is mocked at and despised, but what does God see in him? He sees in him a dignity and a glory second only to himself. He hath put all things under the foot of such a man as that, and crowned him with glory and honour in the person of Christ, and the angels themselves are ministering servants to such a one as that. You see his clothes, you see not him; you see but his earthly tabernacle, but the Spirit, twice born immortal and divine, you see not that. God does. Or if you spiritually perceive that part, you see it as it is, but God sees it as it will be when it shall be like unto Christ, without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing. God sees the poorest child of God as he will be in that day when he shall be like Christ, for he shall see him as he is. It seems in the text that *God looks to what he has prepared for these poor people*—"he hath prepared for them a city." And methinks that by what he has prepared for them he esteems them and loves them; esteeming them by what he means them to be rather than by what they appear to be.

Now let us look at this preparation just a minute; "he hath prepared for them"—*them*. I delight to preach a free gospel, and to preach it to every creature under heaven; but we must never forget the speciality—"he hath prepared for *them* a city." That is, for such as are strangers and foreigners, for such as have faith, and therefore have left the world and gone out to follow Christ. He hath prepared for them, not for all of you, but only for such as he has prepared for the city, has he prepared the city. But note what it is. It is a city, which indicates, first, *an abiding happiness*. They dwelt in tents—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but he has prepared for them *a city*. Here we are tent-dwellers, but the tent is soon to be taken down. "We know that this earthly house of our tent shall be dissolved, but we have a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens." "He hath prepared for them *a city*." A city is *a place of social joy*. In a lonely hamlet one has little company, but in a city much. There all the inhabitants shall be united in one glorious brotherhood—the true Communism; Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, in the highest possible degree. There shall be delightful intercourse. "He hath prepared for them *a city*." It is a city, too, *for dignity*. To be a burgess of the City of London is thought to be a great honour, and upon princes is it some-

times conferred; but we shall have the highest honour that can be given when we shall be citizens of the city which God has prepared.

But I must not dwell on this, delightful theme as it is, for I must close by noticing you, who are the children of God. Don't wonder, don't wonder if you have discomforts here. If you are what you profess to be, you are strangers. Don't expect the men of this world to treat you as one of themselves—if they do, be afraid. Dogs don't bark when a man goes by that they know—they bark at strangers. When people slander and persecute you no longer, be afraid. If you are a stranger, they naturally bark at you. Don't expect to find comforts in this world that your flesh would long for. This is our inn, not our home. We tarry here a night; we are away in the morning. We may bear the discomforts of the eventide and the night, for the morning will break so soon. Remember that your greatest joy while you are a pilgrim is your God. So the text says, "Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God." Do you want a greater source of consolation than you have got? Here is one that can never be diminished, much less exhausted. When the creature streams are dry, go to this eternal fountain, and you will find it ever springing up. Your God is your true joy: make your joy to be in your God.

Now what shall be said to those who are not strangers and foreigners? Oh! you dwell in a land where you find some sort of repose, but I have heavy tidings for you. This land in which you dwell, and all the works thereof, must be burned up. The city of which you, who have never been converted to Christ, are citizens, is the City of Destruction, and as is its name such shall be its end. The king will send his armies against that wicked city and destroy it, and if you are citizens of it you will lose all you have—you will lose your souls, you will lose yourselves. "Whither away?" saith one. "Where can I find comfort then, and security?" You must do as Lot did when the angels pressed him and said, "Haste to the mountain, lest thou be consumed." The mountain of safety is Calvary. Where Jesus died, there you shall live. There is death everywhere else, but there is life in his death. Oh! fly to him! "But how?" saith one. Trust him. God gave his Son, equal with himself, to bear the burdens of human sin, and he died a substitute for sinners, a real substitute, an efficient substitute for all who trust in him. If thou wilt trust thy soul with Jesus, thou art saved. Thy sin was laid on him. It is forgiven thee. It was blotted out when he nailed the handwriting of ordinances to his cross. Trust him now and ye are saved. That is, you shall henceforth become a stranger and a pilgrim, and in the better land you shall find the rest which you never shall find here, and need not wish to find, for the land is polluted. Let us away from it. The curse has fallen. Let us get away to the uncursed and ever blessed, where Jesus Christ dwells for ever. God add his blessing on these words for Christ's sake. Amen.